

## ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION: AN OVERVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

Since the beginning, humanity has been nourished by the various elements that constitute nature. However, use of the diverse renewable and non-renewable resources at our disposal, such as water, soil, fossil fuels, and metals, have not until quite recently translated into the abuse of our environment. While the west is encountering problems of waste and pollution due to overconsumption and prosperity, India is facing the same troubles due to overpopulation and severe poverty. Due to the reality that our earth is, for the most part, a closed system, we must come to terms with the fact that sustainability is the means to a continued survival.

Environmental ethics inculcate a precious code in the individuals and societies and ought to be developed in each person, to command him/her as a force from within to make decisions and take actions on the different aspects of the environment which are not harmful to the local, national and international community. Environmental ethics has to sharpen the judgments of a person not to jeopardize the health and security of other fellow beings for the sake of material and political gains. The ethics command us not to endanger the health of an individual and communities, but to serve as a proud and honest person in the service of humanity. Environmental ethics is a shouting match between caricatures – between romantic, uninformed, antiscientific “Greens” also called as *Environmental holists* (reflecting Eco-centric worldview) and unscrupulous, insensitive industrialists and developers called as *Technocratic individualists* (reflecting Anthropocentric worldview). Proponents of both extreme positions often fail to trace the logical consequences of their ideas. A middle path towards a culture of sustainability and permanence is advocated.

Religion plays a great role in shaping our attitude towards the natural world. Long before Environment became the refrain of the global song at Stockholm and Rio, the ancient Indic heritage had already provided a spacious spiritual home for the environmental ethos. The Hindu, Islam, Jain, Vedic and Buddhist traditions established the principles of ecological harmony centuries ago - not because the world was perceived as heading for an imminent environmental disaster or destruction, nor because of any immediate utilitarian exigency, but through its quest for spiritual and physical symbiosis, synthesized in a system of ethical awareness and moral responsibility.

It has rightly been said “*The environmental crisis is an outward manifestation of the crisis of mind and spirit*”. It all depends upon how do we think and act. If we want to check the environmental crisis, we will have to transform our thinking and attitude. That in turn would transform our deeds, leading to a better environment and better future. Environmental ethics can provide the guidelines for putting our beliefs into actions and help us to decide what to do for protecting the mother earth.

**KEYWORDS:** Environmental Ethics, Environmental Crisis, Anthropocentric Worldview, Eco-Centric Worldview, Religious Environmental Ethics

## INTRODUCTION

Environmental ethics inculcate a precious code in the individuals and societies. Environmental ethics ought to be developed in each person, to command him/her as a force from within to make decisions and take actions on the different aspects of the environment which are not harmful to the local, national and international community. Environmental ethics has to sharpen the judgments of a person not to jeopardize the health and security of other fellow beings for the sake of material and political gains. The ethics command us not to endanger the health of an individual and communities, but to serve as a proud and honest person in the service of humanity (Ghaznawi, 1990)

Why is it that we can nourish a person in outer space, but we cannot feed or inoculate the children of Calcutta or Los Angeles? The reason behind this question is that, while we are tragically incompetent in science and technology, we are logically incompetent in ethics and politics. And if we are incompetent in ethics, then perhaps the worst environmental pollution is mind pollution. The measure of the degree to which our minds have been polluted is the extent to which the environmental debate is dominated to extreme positions. It is frequently a shouting match between caricatures – between romantic, uninformed, antiscientific “Greens” also called as *Environmental holists* (reflecting Eco-centric worldview) and unscrupulous, insensitive industrialists and developers called as *Technocratic individualists* (reflecting Anthropocentric worldview). Proponents of both extreme positions often fail to trace the logical consequences of their ideas.

Ethics is practical reasoning aimed at action; environmental ethics is practical philosophy. Environmental ethics concerns how humans, as moral agents, should best live their lives in their earthly home. It includes the study of human beings, the study of the environment, and the study of relationships between the two. From Socrates to Sartre, ethics has been about humans. This sustained emphasis on human beings for 25 centuries has made moral philosophy in the Western tradition thoroughly anthropocentric, or “human-centered”. Environmental ethics constitutes critiques of anthropocentrism – some positive and others negative (Keller, 2010).

Axiologically, anthropocentrism holds that human beings, and human beings, only are of intrinsic value (that is, valuable in and of themselves) and that non-human nature is valuable only insofar as it is valuable for human purposes (that is, valuable instrumentally – extrinsically – for its ability to serve human ends). American philosopher J. Baird Callicott states the difference succinctly: An anthropocentric value theory (or axiology), by common consensus, confers intrinsic value on human beings and regards all other things, including other forms of life, as being only instrumentally valuable, that is, valuable only to the extent that they are means or instruments which may serve human beings. A non anthropocentric value theory (or axiology), on the other hand, would confer intrinsic value on some non-human beings (Callicot, 1984).

### **One Extreme: Technocratic Individualism**

Historically, the ethics in the west have been individualistic. In some respects, these individualistic ethics have brought an end of much of human sufferings. They have provided the moral and political foundations for the recognition of basic human rights for many persons; as a result, blacks, women and children have won recognition of their equality. However, along with economic prosperity, individualistic ethics have encouraged some ruthless behaviour – in the name of progress. Behaviour towards the environment has been dominated until recently by what some people call “cowboy” ethics after the American cowboy who killed the native peoples, raped the land and nearly extinguished the bison. Contemporary technocratic individualists like Drucker believe that the end – technological progress and economic expansion – always justifies the means – exploiting the earth (Drucker, 1972).

Obviously there are many difficulties with the economics, the ethics, and the science underlying technocratic

individualism. Oscar Wilde's description of a cynic also holds for technocratic individualists – they know the price of everything and the value of nothing. They ignore the equity of distributions of risks, costs and benefits. They ignore the facts that existing income distribution may be neither sustainable nor equitable in the long run, but at the same time they use these distributions as a basis for measuring progress (Shrader-Frechette, 1987).

Technocratic individualists also encourage rapid use of environmental resources because "Net Present Value" of goods, for neoclassical economists exceeds their investment value and almost always attempt to use finite planetary resources as quickly as possible. Economist Schumacher (1974) has warned that such pattern of resource consumption indicates a way of life that can "have no permanence" or sustainability. The over-consumptive way of life of technocratic individualists ignores the fact that the world resources are part of a closed, and not an open system. Hence, it ignores the second law of thermodynamics. If developed nations, following technocratic individualism, continue to deplete non-renewable resources and to distribute them inequitable, we all are headed for economic and environmental destruction. We cannot continue living parasitically on the borrowed ecological capital of the future, capital that we shall never be able to repay. Condemning technocratic individualism and its economics of over-consumption, Schumacher says that it is "an act of violence against nature, which must almost inevitably lead to violence between men".

Technocratic individualism also leads to the "Tragedy of the Commons" (Hardin, 1968). The tragedy that most persons, especially within an individualistic ethical system, constantly attempts to maximize their own welfare, even at the expense of others. As a result everyone suffers. The tragedy is that few persons will act so as to preserve what is common property, for example, air quality.

If science and technology could solve all the problems created by technocratic individualists, there would be no tragedy of commons. People would not be dying of environmental pollution and world's inhabitants would not be malnourished. Likewise, if technocratic individualism gave correct ethical guidance, species would not be getting extinct at the fastest rate since the beginning of time. Clearly, we need environmental ethics that are more sensitive to the full costs of planetary degradation, pollution, and resource depletion.

### **Another Extreme: Environmental Holism**

Environmental holists challenge the greed, callousness and ignorance that underline many attitudes to nature. They criticize the waste and avarice that characterize the disproportionate pollution and misuse of resources in many developed countries. Environmental holists reject the over-consumption, the neoclassical economic values, and the human centered focus of the technocratic individualism. Holists like Leopold (1949) claim that we must abandon anthropogenic ethics. They believe that all human beings and non humans – deserve *equal* respect as *equal* members of the "biotic community".

Environmental holism, however, suffers from both scientific and ethical problems. A more troubling ethical difficulty with environmental holism is called as "Environmental fascism". If we follow the environmental ethics of maximizing environmental welfare as opposed to human welfare, one thereby gives priority to the ecosystem or biosphere before individual human good. This means that massive human deaths or violations of civil rights could be justified, even required, if they would promote environmental welfare. Hardin (1974) in his famous "lifeboat ethics", claims that developed countries are like crowded lifeboats while developing countries are like groups of people drowning in the sea. Hardin argues that the people in the lifeboats should not help the poor swimmers struggling to save their lives and plunder the planet. In this view, environmental welfare ought always to come before human welfare. But, we may regard this theory as instance of environmental fascism.

Environmental holism also leads to an ethical dilemma. If humans were truly equal members of the biotic community, then they would have no special responsibilities and no more obligations to refrain from cheating, stealing and killing than do other animals and plants.

Another ethical difficulty is that environmental holists proclaim the ethical “interests” or the “rights” of ecosystems, plants and animals. If one tries to respect the rights of all living things, then it would be impossible for a consistent environmental holist even to obtain food or to destroy disease.

Despite the correctness of part of environmental holism, the view errs because it is impossible to “respect all nature”. In a sense, environmental holism is incomplete because it provides no clear criteria for deciding when human interests ought to have priority over non-human interests.

## **RELIGION AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS**

Until very recently, the role of our cultural and spiritual heritages in environmental protection and sustainable development was ignored by international bodies, national governments, policy planners, and even environmentalists. Spiritual dimension, if introduced in the process of environmental policy planning, administration, education, and law, could help create a self consciously moral society which would put conservation and respect for God’s creation first, and relegate individualism, materialism, and our modern desire to dominate nature in a subordinate place.

Religion can evoke a kind of awareness in persons that is different from scientific or technological reasoning. Religion helps make human beings aware that there are limits to their control over the animate and inanimate world and that their arrogance and manipulative power over nature can backfire. Religion instills the recognition that human life cannot be measured by material possessions and that the ends of life go beyond conspicuous consumption.

World religions, each in their own way, offer a unique set of moral values and rules to guide human beings in their relationship with the environment. Religion plays a great role in shaping our attitude towards the natural world. Long before Environment became the refrain of the global song at Stockholm and Rio, the ancient Indic heritage had already provided a spacious spiritual home for the environmental ethos. The Hindu, Islam, Jain, Vedic and Buddhist traditions established the principles of ecological harmony centuries ago - not because the world was perceived as heading for an imminent environmental disaster or destruction, nor because of any immediate utilitarian exigency, but through its quest for spiritual and physical symbiosis, synthesized in a system of ethical awareness and moral responsibility.

In 1967, the historian, Lynn White, Jr., wrote an article in *Science* on the historical roots of the ecological crisis. According to White, what people do to their environment depends upon how they see themselves in relation to nature. White asserted that the exploitative view that has generated much of the environmental crisis, particularly in Europe and North America, is a result of the teachings of late Medieval Latin Christianity, which conceived of humankind as superior to the rest of God’s creation and everything else as created for human use and enjoyment. He suggested that the only way to address the ecological crisis was to reject the view that nature has no reason to exist except to serve humanity. White’s proposition impelled scientists, theologians, and environmentalists to debate the bases of his argument that religion could be blamed for the ecological crisis.

In the context of environmental protection, cultures, religions and legal systems throughout the world contain elements that respect and seek to conserve the natural bases of life, maintaining concepts that can enhance and enrich the development of modern environmental law.

## RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

### Hindu Environmental Ethics

Beliefs supportive of environmental protection can be found in religious traditions such as Baha'ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Bishnoism and Zoroastrianism from around the world. India had an ancient tradition of paying constant attention to protection of environment. There are writings galore, to show that in ancient Bharat every individual had to practice the *dharma* to protect and worship nature (Jariwala, 1992). Sacred groves were kept unmolested and undisturbed since times immemorial (Vartak et al., 1986). Doing harms to these groves was believed to offend the forest spirits and deities. Trees were worshipped in the past (Battacharya, 1968), rivers were considered goddesses (Agarwal, 1985). *Rishis* warned against deforestation and cutting of trees; they believed that this would result in poor rainfall (Agarwal, 1985). Laying emphasis on the purity of the environment, *yagnas* were performed in *vedic* societies to purify the surrounding air. The right to life, passage and healthy surroundings were recognized in the past. However, it is stated that during the period of Aryan civilization, nature was exploited, trees were cut and forest cleared for satisfying the fast-expanding social needs such as building carts and chariots and housing people in cottages built of wood (Agarwal, 1985). Kautiliya envisaged a systematic management of forests. The quantum of punishment for felling of trees was proportionate to the utility of tree. Management of forests was conditioned by the need for promotion of forest based industries on crafts, exploitation of forest wealth in making household articles and for defense purposes (Kangle, 1972).

Religion protects and nurtures nature. If we take a look at Hinduism, we worship the sun, wind, land, trees, plants, and water which is the very base of human survival. Likewise, respect and conservation of wildlife—garuda, lion, peacock, and snake—are part of our cultural ethos from time immemorial. Almost the entire living of God Ram and Goddess Sita was very close to nature. Further, ancient texts written in Sanskrit, Pali or other languages can provide significant details. For instance, the scripture Vishnu Samhitā in Sanskrit language contains some direct instructions dealing with biodiversity conservation (Chhibber, 2008). Hinduism holds to a strong version of the equal sanctity of all life and for thousands of years practiced sustainable agriculture and nonviolence (ahimsa) toward animals and nature (Dwivedi, 1990).

### Bishnoism

The Bishnois are a small community in Rajasthan, India, who practice a religion of environmental conservation. They believe that cutting a tree or killing an animal or bird is blasphemy. Their religion, an offshoot of Hinduism, was founded by Guru Maharaj Jambaji in 15<sup>th</sup> century. About 300 years later, when the King of Jodhpur wanted to build a new palace, he sent his soldiers to the Bishnois area where trees were in abundance. Villagers protested, and when soldiers would not pay any attention to the protest, the Bishnois, led by a woman Amrita Devi, hugged the trees to protect them with their bodies. As soldiers kept on killing villagers, more and more of the Bishnois came forward to honour the religious injunction of their Guru Maharaj Jambaji. The massacre continued until more than 300 persons were killed defending Khejadli (*Prosopis cineraria*) trees. While this massacre was on, children, women and men kept chanting Guru's (Jambho Ji) one of teachings:

*"Sar Santer Rookh Rahe To Bhi Sasto Jaan"*

*(If a tree is saved even at the cost of one's head, it's worth it)*

When the king heard about this human sacrifice, he stopped the operation, and gave the Bishnois state protection for their belief (Dwivedi, 1990). Their sacrifices became the inspiration for the Chipko movement of 1973. Recognizing the sacrifice of Amrita Bishnoi, Government of India (Ministry of Environment and Forests) has initiated the national

award “Amrita Devi Bishnoi Wildlife Protection” for significant contribution in the field of wildlife protection. The award consists of one lakh rupees cash, along with medallion and citation.

Bishnoism- a religious movement is devoted to eco-friendliness and wild life protection. Bishnois are religiously following rules of environmental and wildlife protection and conservation. In 1485 Guru Jambheswar Ji emphasized necessity of ecobalance between human and mother earth and very cleverly made it religiously compulsory for man in form of 29 principles (Geo magazine French edition, 2009; New York Times, 1993). Even today, the followers of Guru Ji continue to protect trees and animals with the same fervour and their sacrifices became the inspiration of the Chipko movement of 1973 (Bishnoi and Bishnoi).

### **The Chipko Movement**

In March 1973, in the town of Gopeshwar in Chamoli district (Uttar Pradesh, India), villagers formed a human chain and hugged the earmarked trees to keep them from being felled for a nearby factory producing sports equipment. The same situation later occurred in another village when forest contractors wanted to cut trees under licence from the Government Department of Forests. Again, in 1974, women from the village of Reni, near Joshimath in the Himalayas, confronted the loggers by hugging trees and forced contractors to leave. Since then, the *Chipko Andolan* (from an Indian vernacular term meaning ‘cling on to’, which describes an unrelenting embracing of the trees to prevent environmental destruction through human intervention has grown as a grassroots eco-development movement.

The genesis of the Chipko movement is not only in the ecological or economic background, but in religious belief. The religious basis of the movement is evident in the fact that it is inspired and guided by women. Women have not only seen how their men would not mind destroying nature in order to get money while they had to walk miles in search of firewood, fodder and other grazing materials, but, being more religious, they also are more sensitive to injunctions such as *ahimsa*. In a sense, the Chipko movement is a kind of feminist movement to protect nature from the greed of men. In the Himalayan areas, the pivot of the family is the woman. It is the woman who worries most about nature and its conservation in order that its resources are available for her family’s sustenance. The Chipko movement has caught the attention of others in India. The Appiko – the migratory Chipko movement, in Karnataka, began in September 1983, when 163 men, women, and children hugged the trees and forced the lumberjacks to leave. That movement swiftly spread to the adjoining districts. These examples are illustrative of the practical impact of Hinduism on conservation and sustainable development.

Mahatma Gandhi warned that “*nature had enough for everybody’s need but not for everybody’s greed.*” Gandhi was a great believer in drawing upon the rich variety of spiritual and cultural heritages of India. His *satyagraha* movements were the perfect example of how one could confront an unjust and uncaring though extremely superior power. Similarly, the Bishnois, Chipko, and Appiko people are engaged in a kind of “forest *satyagraha*” today. Their movements could easily be turned into a common front—“satyagraha for the environment”—to be used against the forces of big government and big business.

Environmental ethics, as propounded by ancient Hindu scriptures and seers, was practiced not only by common persons, but even by rulers and kings. They observed these fundamentals sometimes as religious duties, often as rules of administration or obligation for law and order, but either way these principles were properly knitted within the Hindu way of life. In Hindu culture, a human being is authorized to use natural resources, but has no divine power of control and dominion over nature and its elements. Hence, from the perspective of Hindu culture, abuse and exploitation of nature for selfish gain is unjust and sacrilegious (Dwivedi, 1990).

## **Islamic Environmental Ethics**

In Islam, the conservation of the environment is based on the principle that all the individual components of the environment were created by God, and that all living things were created with different functions, functions carefully measured and meticulously balanced by the Almighty Creator. Although the various components of the natural environment serve humanity as one of their functions, this does not imply that human use is the sole reason for their creation. ... (Izzi Deen, 1990). In 1983, Muslim experts undertook a study of the relationship between Islam and environmental protection. See: *Islamic Principles for the Conservation of the Natural Environment* (IUCN Environmental Policy and Law Paper 20, 1983). The results underscored that man is a mere manager of the earth and not a proprietor; a beneficiary and not a disposer or ordainer. Man has been granted inheritance to manage and utilize the earth for his benefit, and for the fulfillment of his interests. He therefore has to keep, maintain and preserve it honestly, and has to act within the limits dictated by honesty. Each generation is entitled to use nature to the extent that it does not disrupt or upset the interests of future generations. Islamic principles thus envisage the protection and the conservation of basic natural elements, making protection, conservation and development of the environment and natural resources a mandatory religious duty of every Muslim.

*Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind. - Albert Einstein*

## **Buddhist Environmental Ethics**

From the Buddhist viewpoint, humans are not in a category that is distinct and separate from other sentient beings, nor are they intrinsically superior. All sentient beings are considered to have the Buddha nature, that is, the potential to become fully enlightened. Buddhist do not believe in treating non-human sentient beings as objects for human consumption. The core of Buddhist Karma based ethics is respect for life, particularly sentient life. On every level of understanding, Nature changes according to the karma (pattern of intentional causal activities and their consequences) of all sentient beings. Mental pollution causes environmental pollution and environmental pollution fosters mental pollution.

The starting point for understanding just about anything about Buddhism is karma. Karma is the causal network of intentional actions, both mental and physical, that is the foundation of Buddhist ethical understanding. The foremost principle of Buddhist karma based ethics is ahimsa, the principles of non-harming and of respect for life. This does not only refers to respect for human beings, but also for every manifestation of life on the planet, especially sentient life. The principles of compassionate ecology are also taught in Buddhist schools (Epstein, 2005).

Ancient Buddhist chronicles, dating to the third century B.C. record a sermon on Buddhism in which the son of the Emperor Asoka of India stated that, "the birds of the air and the beasts have as equal a right to live and move about in any part of the land as thou. The land belongs to the people and all living beings; thou art only the guardian of it." (*The Mahavamsa, or the Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, Chap. 14, quoted in I.C.J., *Case Concerning the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project on the Danube*, Sept. 25, 1997, Sep. Op. of Judge C. Weeramantry, n. 44). Subsequently, the King initiated a legal system that continued to exist into the eighteenth century providing sanctuaries for wild animals.

Certain passages in the Judeo-Christian texts specify that humans do not own the earth and its resources. Jewish law provided for conservation of birds (Deut. 22:6-7) protection of trees during wartime (Deut. 20:19), and regulated the disposal of human waste (Deut. 23:13). Christian tradition allows that man's dominion over nature includes a competence to use and manage the world's resources in the interests of all, being ready to help others in case of necessity. Individual title thus imposes a responsibility and a trust.

## CONCLUSIONS

Historian Lynn White's celebrated 1967 essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", demonstrated that ecological degradation is a problem of ideology as well as industrialization and argued that issues of environmental crisis are not the sole purview just of natural science but also of humanities. Biologist Garrett Hardin's equally celebrated 1968 essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons," demonstrated that ecological degradation is a collective cost resulting from the egoistic economic pursuit of profit. It seems right that "*The environmental crisis is an outward manifestation of the crisis of mind and spirit*". It all depends upon how we think and act. If we want to check the environmental crisis, we will have to transform our thinking and attitude. That in turn would transform our deeds, leading to a better environment and better future. Environmental ethics can provide the guidelines for putting our beliefs into actions and help us to decide what to do for protecting the mother earth.

Anthropocentric and eco-centric interests are intertwined. We are all interdependent. If we wish to be good, we must first be wise. The basis value of a sustainable society, the ecological equivalent of the Golden Rule is simple: each generation should meet its needs without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987). Put into practice, this elementary sounding principle translates into radical changes. It implies that the global consumer classes have an ethical obligation to curb our consumption, since it jeopardizes the chances for future generations. The philosophy of sufficiency is deeply rooted in the human past. Materialism was denounced by all sages, from Buddha to Mohammad, and every world religion is rife with warnings against the evils of excess. These religious founders disagreed with each other on various issues but they all emphasized with one voice that if made material wealth our paramount aim, this would lead to disaster (Durning, 1992). Propagating lower consumption as an ethical norm ultimately requires that we revive the non-consuming philosophy that lies dormant in our culture- our collective memory, wisdom, and ways – and use it to mold a new culture of permanence.

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